

Parenting Under Stress: What Parents and Young Children Need to Thrive In Dangerous and Uncertain Times

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Wonder!



The joy of discovery

- **Discovering the world**
 - Locomotion!
 - Words!
 - “I can do, therefore I am”
- **Discovering the other**
 - Attachment: Secure base
 - Theory of Mind
 - Social expectations
 - Good and bad
- **Discovering the self**
 - Exploring the body
 - Self-recognition
 - Naming feelings
 - Gender awareness

Normative Anxieties: Early Origins of Lifelong Internal Stress



- **Fear of separation**
8-24 months
- **Fear of losing love**
18-36 months
- **Fear of body damage**
12-36 months
- **Fear of being bad: Origins of a moral conscience**
36 months -5 years

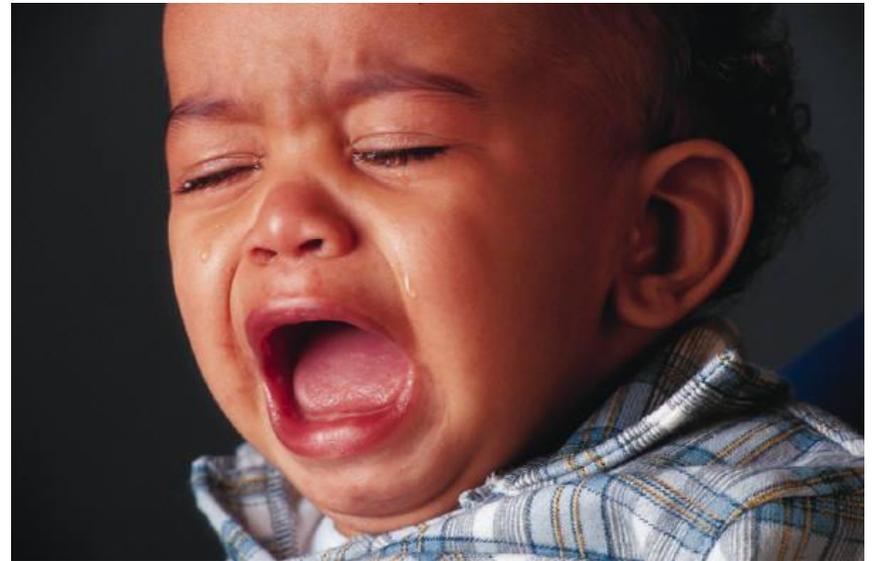
Normative Parental Functions

- Protection from danger
- Caregiving
- Socialization
- Reality testing
- Giving the child a sense that life is valuable and meaningful

- Cultural differences in values and expectations
- Each of these functions is vulnerable to stress and trauma

Reality Matters: Impact of Stress and Trauma

- The first 3 years are the most dangerous in the child's life:
 - *Accidental injury*
 - *Interpersonal violence*
- Danger confirms anxiety:
 - *“I will be left; I will be hurt; I can't be loved; I am bad”*
- Fear is an adaptive response:
 - *Freeze, fight, flight*



COVID-19 and Sheltering-in-Place: Adjusting to New Stresses

- Fear of known danger: Illness and death
- Uncertainty generates anxiety:
 - What will happen if...?
 - What information can we trust?
 - What social supports can we rely on?
 - When will it end?
 - Heightened inequities
 - Low-income and minorities are disproportionately affected
- Financial repercussions
 - From lower income to urgent need
- Sheltering-In-Place:
 - Physical constraints
 - Increased expectations amidst higher need
 - No safety valve

Risk as a Continuum from Stress to Trauma: Where do COVID-19 and Sheltering in Place Belong?

Normative,
Developmentally
Appropriate Stress

Situationally appropriate,
Manageable-to-
Dysregulated Stress

Traumatic Stress



Creating A Secure Base: Pillars of a Therapeutic Attitude



- Authentic connection over fear, protection and hope is the most important therapeutic intervention we can offer right now
- Legitimizing fear as a primary motivation that fosters survival
- Attachment: Protection and safety are the foundation of healthy love for children **and** adults
- “Being with” in empathic problem solving with problems of living and emotional

Assessing Traumatic Experiences: Objective Danger And Coping Resources



Linking Reality, Emotions, and Behavior:

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

- William Faulkner



Giving Meaning To Behavior

- Developmental framework
 - *Lens of normative themes and competencies*
 - *Lens of normative anxieties*
- Individual characteristics
- Environmental framework
 - *Cultural childrearing values and practices*
 - *Family relationships, attachment quality*
 - *Adversity/trauma vs. Protective resources*
 - *Historical experiences/Historical trauma*

Young Children’s “Out Of Control” Behaviors May Be Signs Of Fear and Stress



What Parents Need: Self-Care Helps Children As Well

- Chronic collective danger increases emotional exhaustion
- Fatigue makes us irritable, aggressive and withdrawn
- Take small breaks to prevent the accumulation of stress
- 60-90 seconds may be suffice, repeated throughout the day
- Notice the dysregulated feeling and give a name to it
- Engage in a self-care activity that engages your kindness

Changes In Parent-Child Relationship In the Context of Chronic Stress

- Impaired affect regulation
- New negative attributions
 - Changes to mental representations
 - Traumatic expectations
- Parent and child may become traumatic reminders for one another



Building a Partnership



- Translating the discrepancies in child's and parents' experiences
- Keeping “what happened” in mind
- Coping with incompatible agendas
- Negotiating disagreements
- Parent as supportive socializer
 - Body language
 - Tone of Voice
 - Facial expression
 - Use of words

Service Providers New Roles: Trauma and Resiliency-informed Tele-health



*Photo by Lynnly Labovitz;
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Help protect children and caregivers from the physical and psychological health impacts of COVID-related stress

- Telehealth sessions can foster closeness
- Show interest in immediate safety
- Validate feelings as legitimate responses
- Help move from dysregulated/traumatic stress to adaptive, manageable situational stress
- Foster continued safety, developmental momentum, socialization goals

The Importance of Repair



- Conflict is normal and expectable in all close emotional relationships
- Does the conflict get resolved, or does it accumulate and grow?
- How can we pause and redirect angry feelings before they get out of control?
- Making up after a fight
- When words are not enough: Using action to repair